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ABSTRACT

Teachers' beliefs related to teaching practices, knowledge, and social relations in and beyond the classroom were studied in urban schools serving African American children primarily. Two hundred forty-four teachers from six schools completed surveys about their beliefs. Of these teachers, 94% taught grades kindergarten through five, and 10% taught grades six through eight. Five factors emerged from the survey. Factor 1, "culturally congruent," contains 14 items that described beliefs regarding the importance of cultural and racial identity of the students in guiding the curriculum. Factor 2, "professional commitment," consisted of four items describing teachers' professional commitment to urban education. Factor 3, "self-determined," described teachers' self-directed, rather than student-directed, planning, and factor 4, "failure to connect," described the inability to connect with students. Factor 5, "poor learner support," described teachers' strategies for helping low achieving students. (SLD)

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Angela Love

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The Measurement of Teachers' Beliefs as Cultural Context for Successful Learning of African American Children

Angela Love, Ph.D.
Queens College - CUNY
Poster presentation
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Qualitative studies have investigated successful and culturally relevant learning environments for urban African American children and identified particular belief sets that characterize teachers in these settings (Boykin, 1983; Hale-Benson, 1982; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Willis, 1995, 1998). There are, however, no quantitative studies that measure the teachers' beliefs as a means for further quantitative investigation between those beliefs and student achievement, specifically in an urban, primarily African American, population. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to measure teachers' beliefs related to teaching practices, knowledge, and social relations in and beyond the classroom, examining the factors that emerge, in urban schools serving primarily African American children. The measurement of these beliefs was primarily based on the qualitative studies of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Willis (1995).

Ladson-Billings (1994), like Willis (1998; 1995), began with successful learning environments and studied what occurs in the classrooms and in the schools. They were each concerned with the beliefs and practices that could be deciphered through in-depth interviews and observations. Their work creates a foundation from which quantitative measures of beliefs and practices can be created to measure the range of beliefs of teachers of African American children in urban schools. Such quantitative measures can then be correlated with student outcomes to examine the relationships and effect sizes of these relationships. Studies are lacking that have developed a quantitative measure of teachers' beliefs regarding teaching, knowledge, and social relationships in classrooms serving African American children. Furthermore, studies are lacking that have examined the relationship between these beliefs and student learning. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to quantitatively assess these beliefs that have emerged from studies of effective teaching of African American children. This was accomplished by (1) creating a survey to assess teachers' beliefs about knowledge, teaching practices, and social relationships with the students in and beyond the classroom, consistent with beliefs reflected in previous qualitative studies described above; and (2) assessing the factors that emerge from the survey of teachers' beliefs, and comparing them to those factors that were expected.

The questions this study was designed to address are as follows: (a) Does the constructed questionnaire measure factors related to teachers' beliefs about knowledge, teaching practices, and relationships with students in and beyond the classroom? (b) How much variance in teachers' answers on this questionnaire is accounted for by the factors that emerge?

Based on these questions, the following predictions were tested.

1. Teachers' beliefs will be measured by the current questionnaire and will show factors related to specific beliefs regarding teaching philosophy—that is, beliefs about knowledge, teaching practices, and social relations in the classroom, endorse the successful teachers' beliefs and practices in Ladson-Billings' (1994) study.

2. The amount of variance in teachers' responses accounted for by the emergent factors will be close to 60%, a standard goal for instrument development.

Method

Two hundred forty-four teachers from six schools completed surveys regarding their beliefs. Ninety percent of the participating teachers taught students in grades kindergarten through five, while 10% taught grades six through eight. Teachers were 48% African American, 42% Caucasian, 3% Latino/Hispanic, Indian, Asian, Biracial, and 7% unreported ethnicity. All categories for ethnicity were self-identified. Eighty-five percent of the participants were female. Mean teacher age reported was 38 years, ranging from 22 to 67 years. Mean years of previous teaching experience reported was 12, ranging from 0 to 37 years. Level of education varied between "some college with no degree" to possession of a doctorate degree. The only criterion for filling out the survey was that the participants be currently teaching or have experience teaching students in the past. This included classroom teaching, as well as small group instruction, such as library media instruction conducted by the media specialist, or self-help skills taught by the counselor. Therefore, teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, principals, instructional specialists, and media specialists filled out the surveys if they were presently teaching or had taught students in the past.

Items were written to reflect beliefs endorsing the approach to teaching and organizing the learning environment described from the qualitative studies of successful teachers of African American children (Ladson-Billings, 1994). There were 25 such items. The other 23 items were written to contrast this approach, reflecting more of a traditional learning environment and teaching style.

Results and Discussion

Five factors emerged from the survey as follows (see Table 1). Factor I, named "culturally congruent," contained 14 items that described beliefs regarding the importance of cultural and racial identity of the students in guiding the curriculum (α = = .82). Factor II, named "professional commitment," consisted of four items describing teachers' professional commitment to urban education (α = .72). Factor III, named "self-determined," consisted of four items and described teachers' self-directed (rather than student-directed) planning (α = .46). Factor IV, named "failure to connect," consisted of three items and described teachers' inability to connect with students (α = .58). Factor V, named "poor-learner support," consisted of three items that described teachers' strategies for the purpose of helping lower-achieving students (α = .55).

The findings from the present study may help explore a specific educational context, defined by teachers' beliefs regarding cultural identity of the students and teaching practices, that may be useful in investigations of the relationships among this educational context, student outcome, classroom interaction, classroom discourse, and other contexts for learning. Additionally, the information from the present study may be useful to both pre-service and in-service training of teachers in urban settings.

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Table 1

Correlations of Items with Factors

Item#	FI	FII	FIII	FIV	FV	Item#	FI	FII	FIII	FIV	FV
*1						25	.72				
*2						26					.59
*3						27	.42				
4	.37					28					.56
*5						29		.67			
6	.47					30			-.39		
*7						31				.42	
8	.33					32	.50				
*9						*33					
10					.44	34	.33				
*11						35	.34				
12				.61		*36					
*13						37			.31		
14		.23				*38					
15	.30					39		-.44			
16				.69		40	.40				
17	.41	.57				*41					
*18						42		.72			
*19						*43					
*20						44	.68				
21			-.35			45	.31				
*22						46			.63		
*23						*47					
24	.47					*48					

*20 items did not load on the five factors

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FACTOR I

4. Every student I encounter is successful at something.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
6. Teaching is like an art—it involves dramatizing from the concrete experience to the conceptual level of understanding.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
8. What I learn from my students is as important as what they learn from me.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
15. The cultural background of my students plays an important part in my teaching. I bring their backgrounds (race, culture, heritage, etc.) into my lesson planning.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
17. Teaching is where I belong—I know it and the students know it, too.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
24. Every child is a unique composite of his or her racial, cultural, home, and peer experiences.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
25. The individual needs of the children are an important part of my planning effective lessons.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly
27. I view my students' identities as rich with color and culture.	a. agree strongly b. agree c. undecided d. disagree e. disagree strongly

32. One of the key elements that guide my teaching of content is that students have got to learn to think critically rather than just memorize facts.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

34. Sometimes I play the role of the student and allow students to teach the class.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

35. It is part of my responsibility as a teacher to make connections between what happens in the world and who my students are.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

40. I work with some of the most important people in the world—my students.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

44. The individual needs of the children are an important part of my planning effective lessons.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

45. Every child that comes to me, no matter how poor, is brilliant.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

FACTOR II

17. Teaching is where I belong—I know it and the students know it, too.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
f. disagree strongly

29. Teaching urban children in public schools is where I belong.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

*39. If I had other training I would probably change careers.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

42. I teach in an urban public school because I want to.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

*negatively correlated, therefore reversed scored in calculating mean scale score per teacher

FACTOR III

*21. A good lesson plan is only tentative.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

*30. Students' responses determine where I go with a lesson; I just cannot put a time limit on good teaching.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

37. Someone's got to teach these youngsters in urban schools; it might as well be me.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

46. Teaching is like paying my dues to society. When I'm through paying my debt, I'll probably retire or change professions.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

*Negatively correlated, therefore reversed scored when calculating mean scale score

FACTOR IV

12. Some children I just cannot seem to connect with.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

16. Every year some students can be expected not to be a good match for me—they may, however, succeed with someone else who better meets their needs.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

31. Some students, no matter what I do, will inevitably fail.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

FACTOR V

10. With enough repetition, drill, and practice, students will attain a passing grade.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

26. The reason I use some form of peer learning in the classroom is because it's supposed to help lower achieving students learn the material better.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

28. My students need a good education so that they can move out of this community and have a better life for themselves.

a. agree strongly
b. agree
c. undecided
d. disagree
e. disagree strongly

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